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Seeking a Sustainable Solution to Road Funding Problem

By State Rep. Don Vruwink

It is no secret that Wisconsin's roads are in rough shape. Last February, U.S. News & World Report ranked Wisconsin 49th lowest for the quality of our roads. The number crunchers at that newspaper calculated that only one other state, Connecticut, has worse roads than we do.

Bad roads are not only tough on our cars, they are also tough on our economy. Wisconsin has the second most transportation-dependent economy in the nation, second only to Indiana, according to the Wisconsin Transportation Development Association. Good roads attract industry and tourists to our state.

Roads and bridges in disrepair also create a public safety hazard. If we don't have safe ways of getting from point A to point B, vehicle crashes are more likely.

I hear frequently from people from all walks of life who are upset about the condition of our roads and the need for long-term sustainable funding for road repair. Recently I held a roundtable discussion in Newville at which business owners, representatives of local government, and the general public shared their perspectives.

One idea that was discussed was shipping more products via existing rail lines to take more large trucks off the road. As a representative from Wisconsin & Southern Railroad pointed out, railroads relieve wear and tear on our roads; trains help preserve highways. The last state budget contained funds to help Wisconsin & Southern extend a line from Oregon to Madison.

Another option is to restore indexing of the gas tax to the rate of inflation. By a show of hands, almost everyone in the room said they support tying increases in the gas tax to increases or decreases in the Consumer Price Index. When the Legislature repealed gas tax indexing in 2006, legislative leaders said that if the gas tax fails to generate adequate revenue, the Legislature can always vote to increase it. Since 2006, how many times has the Legislature voted to increase the gas tax? Zero.

Indexing the gas tax received the same level of support at a transportation forum I attended in Elkhorn. There was also a good deal of support for tollways which would require people who use those roads, like our Illinois friends, to help pay for them.

Another option discussed was basing the vehicle registration fee on the value of the vehicle; the more expensive the vehicle, the higher the registration fee. Other states do this but there was not a lot of support for it at my roundtable discussion. We also discussed allowing counties to enact a half percent sales tax so they can repair and maintain their roads.

The speaker of the Assembly is backing a plan to tie transportation funding to changes to the income tax code. But what I hear from my constituents is keep it simple. Don't tie transportation funding to the income tax.

If we don't find a new revenue source for road repair, we will have to continue to borrow money at a time when repaying debt on previous borrowing already accounts for 25 percent of transportation spending.

I would like to hear from more people about how they think we should pay for road repair. Is there an option you prefer? What are you opposed to? If you have a strong opinion on the matter, please share it with me. You can reach my Capitol office by phone at 608-266-3790 or via email at Rep.Vruwink@legis.wi.gov.

Most of us use our roads on a daily basis so it is critical to find a long-term solution instead of kicking the can down the road. If we stay on the present course, there simply will not be any more road to kick the can down.

Rep. Don Vruwink represents the communities of Whitewater, Milton, Edgerton, Footville, part of the Village of Oregon, and several townships.

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